

Spirit of Gentleness

At several of the meetings I've led over the past few weeks, I've started by asking people how they were doing, especially with regard to the changing conditions around COVID. What I've found is that people are all over the map. Some are just so over it, and want life to return to "Normal" as fast as it possibly can. But many other people have been talking about how unexpectedly difficult it has been to move forward after the year we've been through. In a piece about the anxiety people were feeling over reentry this week on NPR, listener's questions ranged from fears about COVID to the strain of having to make small talk again. Our responses are so varied you can't assume you know what the other person is thinking or feeling. Now is a time to stop and listen before reacting.

Today is Pentecost, the day when we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit into the church. The usual story we focus on today is the dramatic story Kathy read from Acts, with blowing wind and burning fire and speaking in tongues with large numbers of converts as a result. It's a story filled with energy and wonder about the new thing God is doing in the world, a story that propels us out into the world with the Spirit's mighty wind. It's a story for those who are ready to jump into life with both feet and get going, about the Spirit who knocks you off your feet with wonder and with power.

But the Spirit doesn't always come as a mighty wind. Sometimes the Spirit is as gentle as our own breath – breathe in, breathe out. As the gospel writer John tells about the Spirit's coming, that's what it's like. The risen Jesus comes and stands among his disciples who are huddled afraid and behind locked doors in an upper room on Easter evening. He offers them his peace = "Peace be with you" and he breathes on them. "Receive the Holy Spirit" and the Spirit comes, as gentle as breath. The Spirit brings peace to their frightened and confused beings. The Spirit breathes peace into us, into the church, into the world.

I know how precious breath is. We breathe in oxygen and it nourishes every part of our body and our being. We take our breath for granted until breathing no longer is easy or automatic. In the last couple of years of her life, my mother experienced the

lack of breath. I saw what it did to her body and her brain when she couldn't breathe enough. We need breath to sustain life.

The Spirit sustains us in a similar way, supporting us with every breath whether we realize it or not, nourishing every part of our being with renewed life with every Spirit-breath.

So this morning I ask you to breathe with me for a moment as we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Breathe in the Holy Spirit. Breathe out your anxiety and fear. Breathe in the Breath of Life. Breathe out your anger and your grief. Breathe in the Spirit of Peace. Breathe out your bitterness and contentiousness. Breathe in. Breathe in. Breathe in. – Okay, now you can breathe out!

Do you see what happens if you don't breathe out? The Spirit is sent to us not just so we can feel good or just so we can be at peace with ourselves and at one with God. We can't just breathe in and keep the Spirit for ourselves, for our own bodies or our own church. At some point, you have to breathe out.

And so in John's gospel, the next thing Jesus says after he breathes the spirit into the disciples is, "As the Father sent me, so I send you." We don't get to stay in that cozy upper room. The Spirit moves through us and out into the world, and impels us to go into the world as well.

That can be a wondrous adventure, filled with holy encounters. It can also be a little scary when you've been in your home and working and worshiping on Zoom for a year. So here's the next part of the good news that the Spirit brings – when you go into the world, you do not go alone.

In John's gospel, Jesus describes the Spirit as the Paraclete, which is one of those words that is virtually impossible to translate accurately into English. It's related to a verb that means "I call alongside". Judith Jones says The Paraclete is the Spirit of Truth whom Jesus calls to accompany his followers as helper, counselor, advocate, and guide. The Holy Spirit is the presence of God with us, the One who assures us we are not alone.

I have two grandchildren right now who are determined to walk, but they're not able to do it on their own yet. As they struggle for balance and learn how to put one foot in front of the other, they hang on to their parents'

hands as they navigate and explore the world around them. As we step out into the post-COVID world, as we navigate the challenges around us and seek to find our balance in this changing world, the Paraclete comes alongside us, holding our hands when we need it, lifting us up when we stumble, comforting us when we fall, encouraging us on our way.

Yesterday we had a leadership retreat here at Tree of Life. Almost all of our elders and deacons gathered for a look at where we had been and to plan some next steps as we move ahead. There were some things we learned about ourselves. We named adaptability as one of the key strengths of our congregation, and because of that strength we think we have ended this time of constant adaptation on a level or even a little ahead of where we were when we entered COVID quarantine, as we welcome some new faces and have tried some new things. Some of the adaptations we've made during COVID have made us a better and stronger church as we face the future – things like hybrid worship and a chance to build a stronger foundation under our disability ministry. We received a statement of mission and core beliefs developed by our Disability Ministry Task Force. This is something you'll hear more about over the next few weeks. And we made some concrete plans for next steps, including some things to let go of, some things to adapt and resume, and some new ideas to try. We left feeling encouraged – remember that encouraging is one of the things the Spirit does – and confident that the Spirit will continue to move with us and among us as we move ahead. We do not go alone.

The last gift the Spirit brings is forgiveness. As Jesus breathes the Spirit into the disciples, he says, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them." And truly, the gift of forgiveness is something we all need before we can move ahead. At our retreat yesterday, we named the divisions that exist between people as a significant issue in our society. In the NPR piece I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon, one of the questions that was asked was, "How can I

forgive people who don't take COVID as seriously as I do?" Depending on where you stand, the question could also be asked, "How do I forgive people who take COVID too seriously?" And that's just one of several things we all are reactive around right now. Lucy McBride, a doctor who was answering those questions on NPR said, "We need to give people a wide berth, forgiveness and latitude, because we've all experienced trauma and we will all process it differently." Forgiveness is something we all need to both receive and to offer to others right now. Forgiveness isn't easy, but it is necessary as we are sent out and move ahead. Anger and resentment will only block the way. But forgiveness isn't just on us. The gentle wind of the Spirit offers us forgiveness and the ability to forgive. It is the work of the Spirit in us.

May the wind/breath/Spirit blow freely today. May it breathe with your own breath, bringing you forgiveness and renewal. May the Spirit blow through our church, bringing encouragement and energy. May the Spirit blow through our world, bringing reconciliation and hope and new beginnings. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Amen.